INTRODUCING DE JONG:
REFLECTIONS UPON RECONSTRUCTING THE LIFE AND PRACTICE OF A WHITE, ENGLISH SPEAKING DESIGNER

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Abstract

Jacob Dlamini, in his seminal text 'Native nostalgia' (2010), confides that the first time he heard the term 'economic sanctions' used in the township was in the early 1980s when he woke up one day to discover the local Barclays Bank had been renamed First National Bank (FNB). Notably, Dlamini continues to list "a bottle store and … the biggest news agent in Katlehong" as signifiers of urban life of Katlehong, but only the bank is recalled by brand. At the time, the re-branding of Barclays engendered a storm of protest in South Africa, both in design circles, and amongst members of the public. Perhaps less known than the infamous 'rabbit' and 'AK-47 rifle' is that a local design firm – Ernst De Jong Studios – was asked to submit an alternative to the 'imported' identity. In the late 1980s, 30 years after he established himself as a young graphic designer in Pretoria, it was also De Jong who was tasked with persuading a white, patriarchal Nationalist Party Cabinet meeting that a white patriarchal male had no place on South Africa's currency: the result was the CL Stals – Second Issue: the 'Big Five' bank note series.

This paper outlines challenges inherent in proposed research with regard to the individual designer as an 'interactive dynamic of the community and society in which he or she is embedded'. Ernst de Jong and his studio arguably shaped many of the shared values, practices, processes and products of an ostensibly 'modern' South Africa through the construction of visual identities of communities – both corporate and national – from the 1950s to the 1990s. By importing his experience of American modernism into an African context, De Jong brought diverse influences to bear on his task of 'imagining' a nation. Intersecting with debates on the nature of history writing, and writing design, this project grapples with ideas of modernity, domestication, and South African graphic design history in its reflection upon the life and practice of a singular South African communication designer.

Keywords*: Design history; biography; Ernst De Jong; individuated design; domestication*

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Introduction

Focus of the overall paper

This paper reflects upon the challenges presented by a proposed study that sets out to explore and describe the life of Pretoria-based designer and artist Ernst De Jong (1934 -) and addresses the sometimes controversial idea of 'the designer' and his/her creative orientation to the world. In doing so, the paper responds to concerns of theory and criticism in the field of design history and education.

Background: why De Jong?

Ernst De Jong was born on 29 September 1934, in Pretoria, South Africa; in 1951, he was awarded a scholarship to attend the University of Oklahoma (OU) in the United States of America (USA) where he pursued a degree in Fine Arts (majoring in Information Design).[1] In the USA, De Jong was introduced to American abstract expressionism and was awarded the Letzeiser Arts Degree Medal for Best Student in the Faculty in 1956. In 1957 he was briefly employed at the Graphic Arts Centre in Oklahoma City but decided to return to South Africa.

Figure 1. George Duby (art director) and Ernst de Jong (designer), 1958. Cover of *Lantern* (7)3. This is the first issue of *Lantern* where the designer of the cover is acknowledged.
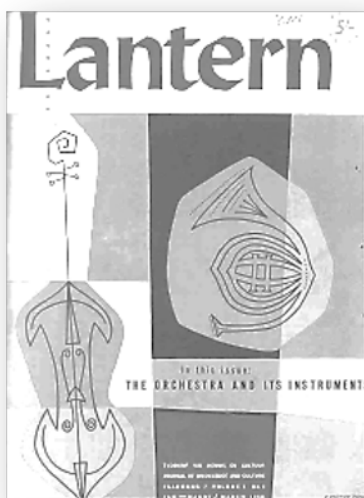
Upon De Jong's relocation to Pretoria in 1958 he secured a lecturing position at the Pretoria College for Advanced Technical Education;[2] this appointment resulted in both an educational and a corporate shift with regard to art and design in the region. De Jong incorporated the Oklahoma experience into his teaching methods and immediately started to exert a professional presence: commissioned to design selected covers for *Lantern*, a journal published by the Association for Adult Education, he not only transformed the rhetoric of the covers with his lively modernism (Fig.1), but, by signing his design, also introduced the concept of the graphic designer as 'artist', or 'author'.

The inseparability of painting and visual communication design skills is, indeed, a tenet that De Jong upholds and vigorously defends. Consequently, despite the launch of his commercial design enterprise Ernst De Jong Studios in 1958, he mounted a solo exhibition of paintings and lithographs in 1959. In the following year De Jong was commissioned by the South African Centre for Industrial and Scientific Research (CSIR) to design its exhibition stand at the 1960 Pretoria Show, which effort landed him the

Designer's Gold Medal. In 1961 De Jong also won a national competition to create selected murals for the new Transvaal Provincial Administrative building and in 1963, De Jong — only 29 years old — was appointed director of Intam (LPE) advertising agency as well as design advisor to the United Tobacco Company.

Coterminous to these achievements, De Jong held solo exhibitions in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Montreal and Milan. In 1965, De Jong was offered exhibitions in top galleries in Manhattan; this offer was a watershed moment for De Jong, who, when presented with the possibility of pursuing a lucrative career in the arts in New York, chose to remain in Africa.

Once established in Pretoria, De Jong dominated the field of corporate identity design. Work from his studio appeared in international publications such as *Graphis* and the *New York Art*

Figure 2. Ernst de Jong, 1960s. Photograph in collection of Ernst De Jong; reproduced with permission of the designer.

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[1] Background facts extracted from 'Legendary painter Ernst De Jong: chronology 2013' (De Jong 2013), as well as conversation with the designer at his residence in Pretoria (De Jong 2013, pers, comm., 22 May).
[2] Currently the Tshwane University of Technology.

Directors Annual. In 1972 De Jong's 'Oklahoma Series' was selected to represent South Africa at the Venice Biennale, and he was tasked with establishing the new Information Design programme at the University of Pretoria (UP). Esmé Berman (1983, p.110), in 1983, states that, 'Ernst de Jong's career furnishes a story of success … [I]n the field of advertising design … he is considered one of SA's leading practitioners'; subsequently, in 1987 De Jong won the prestigious Society of Designers in South Africa (SDSA) Award for outstanding design achievement. In 1988, Ernst De Jong Studios hosted the first meeting of the Blue Sky movement that had as its aim 'the creation of a unique design style based on South Africa's diverse cultural heritage and natural influences' (De Jong 1994, p.10). In 1989 De Jong was appointed by the South African Reserve Bank as design director for five new banknotes, popularly known as the 'Big Five' series. In 1994 De Jong closed his studio in order to devote his energy to painting and teaching.

This brief synopsis suggests that there is much of interest in De Jong's life, yet the only published biographical material on De Jong as seminal designer appears as a brief acknowledgment in *Image & Text* (*Image & Text* 1994, p.32).[3] De Jong (2013a:4) states that, in the years 1958 to 1994, Ernst De Jong Studios 'produced much of South Africa's most prestigious graphic work'; this 36-year period coincides with the establishment of the Republic of South Africa, follows the trajectory of Nationalist Party (NP) rule, and ends with the coming to power of the African Nationalist Congress (ANC). De Jong's clients were often influential and powerful; while much of his client-base was in Johannesburg, De Jong lived and worked in the administrative capital, Pretoria. He is a second-generation English-speaking South African that shaped both monumental and quotidian experiences of South African citizens. Consequently, his 'prestigious graphic work' did not happen in a vacuum, neither was it a purely a superficial aesthetic.

Jessica Helfand (2001, p.137) states that graphic design

> responds to needs at once personal and public … and is informed by numerous
> disciplines including art and architecture … Graphic design is a popular art, a practical
> art, an applied art and an ancient art … [I]t is the art of visualizing ideas.

Here Helfand (2001, p.136) is constructing the context for a reflection upon the prolific career of Paul Rand (1914-1996), 'arguably the most celebrated American graphic designer of the twentieth century', but her comment on the nature of graphic design serves to highlight much of what is important about De Jong. His design work was not merely a commercial necessity: it was the art of visualising ideas, and these ideas have not, to any meaningful extent, been described, explored, or interrogated.

Following from the above, the undertaking to make visible this history seems a necessary one. However, once they are acknowledged, the reasons for the lack of critical (or otherwise) writing on De Jong reveal some of the challenges faced by the would-be biographer of a man who shaped the visual culture of a post-colonial community through a modernism that in the twenty-first century 'seem[s] worthless as a reference to be shared globally' (Calvera 2005, p.371). The 'problems', broadly speaking, are twofold: the theme of biography itself, and the peripheral nature of the proposed history in relation to the global understanding of the subject of design. These framing conditions, impacting as they do on the validity of the study, are therefore briefly considered in this paper.

Key terminology

The field with which the study concerns itself is *graphic design*, namely the design of visual materials for — most typically — client-driven, commercial applications. Although regarded by many as 'technologically

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[3] De Jong is acknowledged in Esme Berman's **Art and artists of South Africa: an illustrated biographical dictionary and historical survey of painters & graphic artists since 1875 (1983, pp.110-111).**

undermined' (see Helmer Poggenpohl & Sang-Soo 2001, p.18), the terms 'graphic design' and 'graphic designer' are used selectively in this paper, since they are appropriate to the timeframe and artefacts that the study addresses.[4]

Premise and methodology of the paper

The premise of this paper is that the writing up the biography of an individual is not unproblematic. However, very few (if any) large-scale biographical studies of individual graphic designers in South Africa have been undertaken and, arguably, a need exists to remedy this lack. Consequently, the paper reflects upon the case of De Jong in order to address some of the points of issue that a writer (or student) of a local design history may encounter when embarking upon an endeavour of this nature.
In order to explore this premise, the paper reviews recent scholarship on the topic, and applies concepts gleaned from the literature to the topic of the study. The paper is also informed by interviews with De Jong himself,[5] as well as a measure of engagement with his work, although an analysis of the content of these interviews, or the designer's output, cannot be addressed here.

The texts selected to construct the present argument are limited by the scope of the paper, but hopefully represent pertinent scholarship on the topics of history writing, writing of design history, and the field of biography in particular. At the very least, a reasonable framework is established within which to begin to interrogate biography as a theme of South African design history.

Rescuing poor modernists - the case for individual biography in South African design history

The shrinking of great men

Any enthusiastic impulse to document the life of a prominent designer requires that the researcher first acknowledges the mid-twentieth-century rejection of 'the ideas of the elite and individual intellectuals' (Green 2008, p.27). Anna Green highlights Lucien Febvre's (quoted in Green 2008, p.27) insistence, in 1922, on history writing that seeks to understand collective human behaviour: 'Not the man, never the man', declares Febvre, who was co-founder of the *Annales* school in France that shared many of the convictions of Marxist historians in Britain. Febvre's assistant was Fernand Braudel whose subsequent work had as its purpose the 'shrinking [of] great men and big events into the sovereign causalities of economics, population, and environment' (Eley 2008, p.37). Reacting against Victorian histories that were set upon constructing 'a gallery of worthies' (Tosh 2000, p.75), scholars were now moved by the populist identification of 'history from below' (Eley 2008, p.45). The writing of individual biographies was therefore one of the earliest casualties of the rise of social history during the 1960s and 1970s.

By the end of the 1970s, however, social history was encountering the 'much vaunted "linguistic turn"' (Eley 2008, pp.125-126) — a shift from 'social' to 'cultural' modes of analysis. First to be dismissed, biography was, again, the first theme of history to be re-evaluated. With feminist scholars in the lead, historians recognised that the life of an individual is a complex text in which the intersection of elaborate and multiform forces might be traced through and inside a particular life, allowing the generalized and the abstract to be focused through the personal and the particular (Eley 2008, p.168).

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[4] Many prominent practitioners in the 2000s continue to refer to themselves as 'graphic designers' despite their expanded engagement with visual media. An example is Bruce Mau (2005, pp. 597-599).
[5] Oral history, as a method of data collection, in itself presents challenges that cannot be addressed within the limitations of this short paper. For a useful overview, see Green (2008, pp.82-98).

However, notwithstanding its resurgence, John Tosh (2006, p.66), at the close of the twentieth century, can still dwell on the reasons why biography has 'no serious place' in historical study. Tosh (2000, pp.75-76) concedes that the most pressing concerns are those of bias and the tendency to a simplified, linear reconstruction of events. Somewhat ambivalently, he suggests that biography should not be 'dismissed altogether' (Tosh 2000, p.76), pointing out that full-scale biographies of dictators are indispensable, just as biographies of unknown individuals make visible a neglected aspect of the past. Tosh (2000, p.76) applauds the scholarly rigour required in systematic biographical research, and the indispensable role of biography in the understanding of intention. Although there is dispute with regard to the latter, Tosh (2000, p.76, emphasis in original) argues that 'plainly the motives of individuals have *some* part to play in explaining historical events. Once this much is conceded, the relevance of biography is obvious'. Biography is, therefore, legitimate, but the inference is that to be relevant its subject must either be an instrument of supreme evil, or labour in abject anonymity.

This distaste with regard to the invention of 'heroes' is reflected in twentieth-century design discourse. John Walker (1989:130) warns that social history has come to be regarded as the appropriate way of writing histories of design; the discipline can no longer claim an 'alternative' status. Walker (1989, p.132) cites Adrian Forty's *Objects of desire* (1986) as a 'sophisticated attempt at a social history of design' in which Forty (2005 [1986], p. 245) posits that '[o]nly by … shifting our attention away from the person of the designer can we properly comprehend what design is'. The analysis of designed objects was now seen as being capable of giving 'direct access to the ideas and emotions of a social group' (Walker 1989, p.133).

However, despite Walker's call for a social history, the next decade saw the publication of several bestselling monographs that would catapult their individual subjects to graphic design stardom — for example, Jon Wozencraft's *The graphic language of Neville Brody* (1988) and Lewis Blackwell's *The end of print: the graphic design of Dave Carson* (1995). Steven Heller's *Paul Rand* (1999) — for which Helfand wrote the biographical sketch referred to earlier — did not so much create a legend, as canonise an old one. Whatever the merits, or not, of these paeans to individual genius, the 'designer-as-hero' prompted debate that was not limited to scholarly theses. Paula Scher (2001, p.31), in response to Rick Poynor's definition, in *Creative Review*, of meaningful graphic design 'authorship', takes Poynor to task for suggesting that '[t]he designer who merely attempts to achieve well-crafted design does not merit serious discussion'. Scher, herself an icon of twentieth-century graphic design, clearly disagrees, but the problem is pertinent to a study of 'successful' designers such as De Jong.[6]

At the time of writing, the most current manifesto on the state of design history is arguably that of Kjetil Fallan, Professor of Design History at the University of Oslo. Fallan (2010:ix), acknowledges the paucity of surveys of design historical scholarship and his aim is to supplement existing frameworks by focusing on more recent discourse. Fallan (2010, pp.7-8) is emphatic that 'design is not art', and outlines the problems in design history that arise from this assumption, one of which is the tendency to view designers as 'artists' or 'authors' — resulting in the much-maligned 'heroic approach'. Fallan (2010, pp.8, 10) leaves no room for doubt:

> Besides being highly elitist, disturbingly mythopoeic and contributing to panegyric personality cult, this bias towards creation/production has also resulted in a neglect of use and consumption.

Thus, the term 'biography' — for Fallan (2010, pp. 37;98) — only refers to the life of objects. Histories of technology, actor-network theory, script analysis and ***domestication*** are what Fallan (2010, pp.56-104)

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[6] The catalyst for this polemic was, largely, the publication of Bruce Mau's *Life style* (2005 [2000]); however, it is interesting to note that Mau's self-promotional text was followed by several monographs celebrating individual graphic designers who have had as their goal 'well-crafted design', for example *Born modern – the life and design of Alvin Lustig* (Heller & Lustig Cohen 2010) and *Saul Bass: a life in film and design* (Bass & Kirkham 2011).

proposes as alternative analytical frameworks for the history of design. Here the emphasis is on use of design in which 'symbolic codes of various kinds are converted into … a personal expression for the user' (Fallan 2010, p.93).

The battle lines are therefore drawn. Published in the same year as Fallan's treatise, *The design history reader* (Lees-Maffei & Houze 2010) only features the names of two eminent designers in the titles of the 67 contributions to the volume.[7] More recently, in *Writing design: words and objects* (2012), Grace Lees-Maffei (2012, p.3, emphasis added) reiterates 'that design history has taken the *object* as its starting point … to find out about *objects* and communicate their social and historical significance'. Of the 17 contributions, only one title alerts the reader to a prominent individual, who is, however, an architecture critic, not the designer of the object in question.[8]

Within the context of the position taken by design theorists such as Fallan and Lees-Maffei, the question of whether 'the intersection of elaborate and multiform forces can be traced through a particular life' necessarily prompts the answer, 'apparently not'. However, in considering the second difficulty raised by a study of De Jong, namely the peripheral nature of the proposed history, Fallan's methodology points the way to an instrument that not only enables narratives about design in peripheral communities, but admits individual authorship (if not an omnipotent hero) to the historical narrative. This is the theoretical framework of **domestication**, and it is reviewed in the following section.

Rather unknown regions: writing design history on the edges of the geographic map

The broad field of study that Fallan (2010, p.55) advocates is *sociodesign*, in which it is acknowledged that technology and society are 'formed and transformed simultaneously'. At first, the approach appears to hold little relevance to a study of graphic design: Fallan's examples are objects such as telephone booths — in Norway. However, the more useful underlying principle is how 'the phenomenon in question is perceived, interpreted and used' (Fallan 2010, p.70). Fallon (2010, pp.89-104) makes a strong case for *domestication*, a model of the consumption process developed by sociologists Roger Silverstone and Leslie Haddon, who offer an account of 'the role of information and communication technologies in everyday life which focuses on innovation as a social and cultural, as well as a political and economic, process' (Silverstone & Haddon 1997 [1996], p.45). Fallan (2010, pp.99-100), in seeking to broaden the concept of *domestication* from the realm of the home to that of national community, calls on the arguments of Anna Calvera (2005, pp.373-383), and in so doing, makes a fortuitous leap from Norway to, as Calvera (2005, p.373) puts it, 'rather unknown regions'.

The leap is, first and foremost, geographical, in that Calvera's (2005, p.380) concern is with the practical problems faced by a local historian, where 'local' signifies a national community 'whose design activities and achievements are still unknown abroad' (Calvera 2005, p.372). Calvera raises the uncomfortable question of the relevance of local histories within the global discourse. 'Peripheral' works are similar in character to those made in the 'centre'; therefore, local design is 'nothing other than new examples to confirm what is already known' (Calvera 2005, p.374). Rather depressingly (for those on the periphery), local design may never be interesting enough to be mentioned, except in a footnote to a world history. In particular, Calvera (2005, p.377) identifies the problem of the simultaneous arrival of 'the idea of design' in many geographical areas in the 1950s and 1960s. What Calvera (2005, p.376) suggests, as a counter to this difficulty, is that it is 'the duty of a local historian … to explain to foreign colleagues what has been different, specific or original about a local process'.

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[7] Of the two articles, one addresses, in a highly ironic tone, Forty's concern with the 'omnipotent' designer – in this case Philippe Starck (see Lloyd & Snelders 2010 [2003]).
[8] See Munson (2012, pp.120-130).

Although Calvera never uses the term *domestication*, Fallan (2010, p.99) proposes that her argument refers 'precisely to … the domestication of ideology. Her point is that … ideas/ theories/knowledge are transformed by their users — just as with the domestication of products'. The second leap, then, is the shift from a theoretical concern with *objects* of design to an interest in the adaptation *of ideas* about design, but also, as Fallon (2010, p.100) emphasises, the adaptation **to ideas,** aesthetics and technologies. An understanding of *domestication* in this sense, Fallon concludes, results in a 'highly rewarding concept' with which to respond to Calvera's call for purposive regional/national narratives in design history.

But does this call include biography? Calvera (2005, p.374) observes that,

> peripheral narratives … have always the same structure: a nation is only known by a highlight moment or personage … It is easy to see the connections between the objectives of this research and … the boundaries imposed by the grand narratives of history.

Calvera's insistence that local histories have **always** been reconstructed as the act of a single 'personage' is, perhaps, debatable; had this been the case, De Jong would be well represented in local literature. However, her point — that adhering to personality cults in regional design history will not persuade foreign colleagues of the worth of this history — cannot be disregarded.

Nevertheless, Calvera does not dismiss biography out of hand. What Calvera (2005, p.374) believes is critical is that the character of 'marginality' should not merely describe itself in terms of appropriation of signs, or as a victim of western imperialism, but rather acknowledge 'alternative experiences that [are] peculiar to local characteristics'. Calvera is positive about westernisation in Creole culture: the design historian is required to grasp the potential of design to play a role in the 'criticism, renewal and transformation' (Calvera 2005, p.378) of a peripheral community transformed by the arrival of 'design'.

The personal and the particular as intersection of multiform forces

Drawing on Calvera's arguments, the proposed study posits that South Africa is a country on 'the periphery' and that it encountered the arrival of 'the idea of design' in the 1950s; it takes as its premise that this arrival was, to an extraordinary degree, facilitated by the American-trained designer Ernst De Jong and as such the latter deserves attention. In answering questions of 'How?', and 'Why?', design arrived in a given nation, the question of 'Who?' must therefore, of necessity, also be addressed. To this purpose, the methodology of *domestication* can be used to examine not only how De Jong, on a personal level, adapts and modifies American modernism for his own use, but also how and why his audience(s) readily incorporate modernity into their national 'home'.

Another country in which 'Design' arrived in the mid-twentieth century was Australia. As was arguably the case in South Africa, the focus of Australian visual culture shifted, in the 1950s, from Britain to North America. Roger Fry (1995 [1989], p.213) asserts that, 'Modernity [in Australia] was … a regime of signs — the arrived appearances of the modern world of metropolitan capitalism'. In contrast to Calvera's optimism, Fry (1995 [1989], pp.216-217) argues aggressively for the 'emptiness' of Australian modernism, that, he claims, 'has never been other than a culture of appropriated fragments'; as a consequence, Fry postulates, postmodernism was taken up in Australia 'with vigor'.

What is of interest here is that postmodernism did not find such a ready home in South Africa. De Jong's own attempts, with fellow Blue Sky members in the late 1980s, to draw on postmodernism's legitimisation of the local and conceptualise an 'indigenous' South African design language, faltered (De Jong 1992, p.10). The reasons for this inability to break away from the 'appropriated fragments' of the centre continue to exercise

the South African design community: 20 years after the launch of Blue Sky, celebrated South African designer Garth Walker (quoted in Unkeless 2008) voices the ongoing necessity 'to establish a new visual language for the country … Our target audience is the people of Umlazi and Soweto but brochures look like they come straight out of Milan'. Walker (quoted in Unkeless 2008) observes that the country's new elite takes direction from the West, suggesting that 'all the emerging markets want to be a super Paris/London/New York'.

Perhaps the grip of the latter could be attributed, in part, to the impact of De Jong's import of a universalising modernism — at a particular time in South Africa's history — which allowed (and perhaps continues to allow) citizens to 'maintain both the structure of their lives and their control of that structure' (Silverstone & Haddon (1997 [1996], p.60). In terms of *domestication*, argue Silverstone and Haddon (1997 [1996], p.60), 'it is precisely the social, political, and economic dimensions of the struggle over meaning and influence which are at issue'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the 'heroic approach' has been held at bay to such a degree that no seminal figures have emerged in terms of graphic design history in Southern Africa. While laudable in one sense, a 'history from below' only reconstructs one aspect of the past; ironically, 'successful' graphic designers seem to have exchanged places with EP Thompson's 'poor stockinger', and are, perhaps, in need of rescue — not for purposes of launching elitist personality cults, but as a contribution in the context of citizenship. As Tosh (2008, pp.141-142) points out, 'without historical perspective we may fail to notice continuities which persist, even in our world of headlong change'.

De Jong operates as a node that feeds into the largely unexplored rhizome of South African visual culture; a reflective/reflexive study of De Jong's personal history — which is alert to the pitfalls of grand narratives — contributes to a memory bank of what is unfamiliar, or alien; Tosh (2000, pp.19-20) regards this strangeness as a nation's most important cultural resource:

Figure 3. Ernst de Jong (designer), c1965. Logo design for Ernst De Jong Studios. Reproduced with permission of the designer.

> Our sense of the heights to which human beings can attain, and the depths to which they may sink, the resourcefulness they may show in a crisis … [is] nourished by knowing what has been thought and done in the very different contexts of the past.

Although all biography deals to some degree with nostalgia, Jacob Dlamini lends support to a remembering that is reflective, ironic and humorous. Quoting Svetlana Boym, Dlamini (2009, p.18) argues that 'longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another'. It is, however, important to be mindful that reflective nostalgia should *be* critical. A key objective of presenting this paper at the 2013 DEFSA conference was to gauge whether an audience who, for the most part, had not experienced 'the very different context' of a 1960s and 1970s South Africa, and who could have no recollection of the impact of De Jong on its discipline, was intrigued or disturbed by the proposed project. The response was encouraging. Referring (nostalgically) to his childhood hero Gerrie Coetzee, Dlamini (2009, p. 145) points out, 'human beings might not choose the circumstances under which they make history, but they still make history anyway'.

De Jong made history, and deserves a place in his South African sun.

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